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Ornithology in the Kingsbridge district.

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A CENTURY'S WORK ON ORNITHOLOGY IN  
THE KINGSBRIDGE DISTRICT.

BY

EDMUND A. S. ELLIOT, M.R.C.S., M.B.O.U.

(Read at Kingsbridge, July, 1897.)

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§

## THE NATURALIST.

## RECOLLECTIONS OF COLONEL MONTAGU.

TAKING REFUGE ONE DAY from the rain in a Devonshire cottage, where a very old man was just finishing his humble mid-day meal, my eye fell upon a case of stuffed birds in a corner of the room. "What have you there?" I asked. "Oh," said he, "some birds that Gibbes, the Colonel's man, stuffed for me." "Who?" I exclaimed. "Why, the man who stuffed Colonel Montagu's birds, he who lived to Knowle." "But surely you didn't know Colonel Montagu; he's been dead more than eighty years." "Well, and I'll be ninety-six come Michaelmas; and I worked for the Colonel and put the glass in all his cases for him, for I was apprentice to Mr B., the painter, and lived to West Alvington."

The old man being fairly started I allowed him to run on in his own way, and, whilst I marvelled at my old friend's vivid memory, I yet seemed to be listening to a voice from the grave. "The Colonel (he said) used to shoot over Bowring's Leigh, all through the woods there, and he often used to come into the workshop, with his gun and dogs, to tell me there was a case ready for the glass to go in."

"What dogs had he got?" I asked. "Always six or seven spaniels, the same size and colour, and he was very proud of his gun, which he called his little Joe Manton."

"What sort of personage was the Colonel?"

"A fine upstanding man, rather stout, very genial, and a good word for everybody; he was a peculiar man and had peculiar tastes; the paper on the staircase at Knowle, I had never seen anything like before or since. He used to attend service sometimes at our church, where I used to sing in the choir and play the fiddle. I remember his saying to me one morning, 'I heard your voice in church yesterday and you sang very well.' His house was full of curiosities, and he had live birds all over the grounds; he took me down to the pond one day, where he had gulls, ducks, and all sorts of swimming birds; one of the gulls formerly belonged to the Rev. Mr V., who told the Colonel that one day he saw the gull swallow a whole brood of young ducklings on his pond, but that he had run out from the house, caught the gull up by the legs, and shooed them all out again, and that they swam away as if nothing had happened; 'but you don't believe that, Henry, do you? because I don't,' said Montagu."

"Do you remember any of the family?" because one son died a prisoner of war in France and two were killed in action, the youngest at the battle of Albuera. "No," was the reply, "I can't say I remember any of them."

"The Colonel died, I believe, from lockjaw?" "Yes; there were some repairs being done to the house and a lot of old timber was lying about; he trod on a rusty nail, which, entering the foot, produced lockjaw, and he died in three days."

"Where was he buried?" "I don't remember, but I helped to make the lead shell for his coffin."

Here I may state there is uncertainty. It is said that Montagu was buried in Kingsbridge Church, and there is a legend to the effect that when that church was restored in 1862 all the coffins in the church were ripped up, the lead stolen, and the contents thrown sacrilegiously into any convenient hole. When Montagu's coffin was reached, it was said to have been the most difficult of all to open, and for a moment after it was opened the features and outlines of the body were perfectly distinct, but instantaneously faded into dust. No stone exists in the church that I can find, neither does the parish register contain any entry of burial.

I then inquired, "Did you ever shoot any birds for the Colonel?"

"No, but my brother did, and he used to go out with the Colonel, who was a capital shot."

At this point of our conversation there were signs that I was delaying my old friend's afternoon siesta, and, as the shower had given way to a sweltering sun again, I took my leave with much respect for one whose memory had served him so long and so well.

With ornithologists, of course, the name of Montagu is a household word. His life was an eminently useful one, as briefly given in the Dictionary of National Biography, and in a memoir written by W. Cunnington for the Wiltshire Natural History Society in 1863, to which sources of information the reader may be referred.

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I HAVE attempted in this paper to show how much the Ornithology of the county is indebted to this immediate district for the records of many rare and interesting species of birds, and how the interest in this particular branch of Natural History may be distinctly traced to the influence of Col. Montagu, that father of British Ornithology, who lived and died here in the early days of the century.

Col. Montagu was born in the year 1755 at Lackham House in North Wiltshire, and was one of a family of thirteen; he entered the Army, and served in the American Wars; he married at the early age of eighteen, and had four sons and two daughters; two sons were killed in action, and another died a prisoner of war in France. In 1797 Montagu, who had resigned his commission, came to reside at the Knowle, Kingsbridge, and devoted his whole attention to Natural History; not only birds, but beasts and fishes also—the books and papers that he wrote, and which are too lengthy to quote here, numbering a score or more, besides numberless records of rare species. No doubt the love of collecting was inherited by Montagu, for we learn the family house at Lackham was stored with a rich collection of curiosities, that a long day might have been well employed in inspecting old chests filled with the costumes and jewelry of different centuries, many such articles of each generation for some hundreds of years having been carefully stored up by the family. All these and the extensive estates also were dispersed by order of the Court of Chancery, on account of litigation between the Colonel and his eldest son; this, and

the loss of his youngest and favourite son at the battle of Albuera, did much to embitter the last days of Montagu's life. In June, 1815, the Colonel had the misfortune to tread upon a rusty nail, lockjaw supervened, and he died on the 20th of the same month. His old and attached friend, the Rev. K. Vaughan, of Aveton Gifford, who was at his bedside during his last illness, having asked him where he would wish to be buried, his characteristic reply was, "Where the tree falls, there let it lie."

I regret being unable to state definitely where Montagu was buried, because I feel sure every bird lover would wish to visit the shrine of so distinguished an ornithologist. It is asserted by some that he was buried in the parish church, but that when the church was restored, some five-and-thirty years ago, the coffin, with all the rest in the church, was despoiled of its leaden shell, and all trace of the vault obliterated; certainly I can find no stone, neither is there any entry in the register of burials. Others, again, state he was buried in the grounds at Knowle; and it is curious that in a genealogical tree I have of the family it states that Montagu was buried at the Knowle, whilst the parish is given with all the rest of the family, ancestors or descendants. Again, very recently I have interviewed an old man, Mr. Henry Veale, of Chillington, ninety-six years of age, who worked for the Colonel. He could not tell me where he was buried, but his vivid memory recalled many a pleasing incident which will be found recorded in the pages of last Saturday's *Field*.

Mr. Nicholas Luscombe, a solicitor practising in the town, was a friend of Montagu's, and is often mentioned by the latter as bringing him uncommon species. He doubtless learnt bird-stuffing from the Colonel; and his son, Mr. Nicholas Luscombe, junr., took up the pursuit, and, as companion to Mr. Henry Nicholls, imparted the art of taxidermy as it was then known to him, when the latter was about sixteen years of age. I might, by the way, state here that taxidermy was a very different affair then from what it is now. In those days it was customary only to remove those soft parts which were easily accessible, replacing the whole of the skeleton, and filling up with a liberal supply of burnt alum and cotton. Some birds thus treated by Mr. Nicholls are still in a good state of preservation, and, of course, all the Montagu Collection in the Natural History Museum, South Kensington, are still in evidence.

The dearth of records between the years 1815 (the year of

Montagu's decease) and 1840, when they multiply again, plainly shows how Mr. Luscombe and his son missed their opportunity; for we find in decade after decade, in many instances year after year, certain species worthy of notice not recorded, and which assuredly must have occurred. About 1840 a reviving influence is apparent, which I am informed by Mr. Nicholls was due to the greater interest taken in Natural History by four persons whose names will be ever associated with the Ornithology of the district. I refer to Mr. Charles Prideaux, Rev. K. Vaughan, Rev. Courtenay Bulteel, senr., and my father, all of whom have left behind them some evidence of their interest in Ornithology. In 1865 Mr. R. P. Nicholls returned from the United States, and from that time forward to now both he and his brother may be associated with records so abundantly found in the various ornithological journals of the day.

Having now briefly shown to whom we are chiefly indebted for the valuable mass of material we have to work upon, let us enter a little into detail as to how the district has assisted the Ornithology of the county.

For the sake of brevity and convenience I have taken the subject in decades.

In the first decade—1800 to 1810—we find recorded occurrences of the Garden Warbler, Dartford Warbler, Cirl Bunting, Hoopoe, Montagu's Harrier, Hobby, Osprey, Great White Heron, Buff-backed Heron, Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Bernacle Geese, Smew, Little Bustard, Dotterel, Ruff (summer plumage).

The Garden Warblers noticed were quite accidental visitors, as we lie to the westward of the line of their annual migration; just as in the same way, quite recently, Nightingales (there were many noticed in the hedge with a number of Redstarts) occurred at Thurlestone. The Dartford Warblers evidently bred in considerable numbers in the early part of the century, but then the area of unbroken land was far greater than it is now, and furze brakes abounded; we only see the bird on migration now in the autumn. An early observation of Colonel Montagu's was to point out, in 1800, the Cirl Bunting as a British bird. It is a common species in the warmer parts of the Continent, but had not before been noticed as indigenous to this country. He found it breeding at Tacket Wood, where also, sixty-five years later, I took a nest. It is a fairly common resident in the neighbourhood. The Great White Heron, said to have been seen by the Rev. K. Vaughan, must be accepted with reserve.

The Buff-backed Heron which was shot in 1808 at South Allington is one of the *only* two obtained in Great Britain.

The Ash-coloured Harrier, or Montagu's Harrier, as it is now called, the Colonel was the first to point out as distinct from the Hen Harrier, from specimens obtained in the neighbourhood.

The Osprey was often to be observed fishing on the Avon or on the estuary in those days, and Montagu's description of their habits is very interesting.

In the next two decades—from 1810 to 1830—I can only find four records, namely, those of the Osprey, Ruff, Glossy Ibis, and Purple Heron. This latter specimen, which was shot on the Avon, is a remarkably fine specimen, and was used by Thomas Bewick to illustrate that species in his work on British birds.

From 1830 to 1840 we find occurrences of the Crossbill, Rose-coloured Pastor, White-tailed Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Osprey, White Stork, Avocet, Phalaropes, Hobby.

Here we begin to get Mr. H. Nicholl's records. The Rose-coloured Pastor was shot at Aveton Gifford; the White-tailed Eagle my father found a man bringing into the town over his shoulder in a sack from Halwell Wood, where he had shot it; the Honey Buzzard was obtained in Woodleigh Woods; the White Storks were seen on Slapton Ley. In June, 1837, the flock of Crossbills were seen by Mr. Nicholls feeding on the fir cones at Combe Royal, whilst in the autumn of 1831 numbers of Phalarope were driven on our coasts by the severe gales.

In the next decade—1840 to 1850—and onwards the records gather in interest, and we find occurring: the Waxwing, Rose-coloured Pastor, Hoopoe, black variety of Montagu's Harrier, Little Bittern, Night Heron, Spoonbill, a Quail year (1846), Little Bustard, a Phalarope year (1845), Spotted Redshank, great flight of Arctic Terns, Richardson's Skua, Great Crested Grebe (full plumage).

The Waxwing was shot at Blackawton in January, 1850. In very severe winters these birds are driven by want of food from the north-east part of Continental Europe and strike our east coast, but comparatively few filter through to Devon or Cornwall. The black variety of Montagu's Harrier lay for three weeks on the cliffs, where it had been flung by the farmer who shot it, before Mr. Nicholls got it. The shocking slaughter of four pairs of Night Herons in the Erme Valley in the spring of 1849 has only to be mentioned to be condemned; but excuses may be offered, as the habits

of rare birds were imperfectly known and little understood at the time. In May, 1842, thousands of Arctic Terns were caught by the easterly gales and driven into the estuary, where scores were knocked down with sticks and stones by the boys between the quays and brought to Mr. Nicholls. In 1846 Quails nested near the town, and were abundant the following autumn.

In the next decade—1850 to 1860—are recorded: the Rufous Warbler, Hawfinch, Brambling, Rose-coloured Pastor, Crested Lark, Bee Eater, Osprey, Hobby, Little Bittern, Bernacle Goose, Whoopers, Little Crake, Glaucous Gull.

This is the first record of a Rufous Warbler occurring in Great Britain; it was shot near the Start. The Hawfinch bred in the grounds at Woolston. In the Arctic winter of 1852-1853 the district swarmed with Bramblings, and in the same winter several Whooper Swans were shot on the estuary. The Bee Eater was shot near Ilton Castle; and a pair of Crested Larks, which species is common along the shores of the Mediterranean, were observed on Slapton Sands by the late President of the British Ornithological Union—Lord Lilford—himself. We get no record of Hoopoes in this decade, and on seeking an explanation, Mr. Nicholls tells me they occurred so regularly that he did not think it necessary to record them. There are some species which are recorded with such frequency in the first sixty or seventy years of the century, annually in some instances, such as Hoopoes, Rose-coloured Pastors, Little Bitterns, Night Herons, Osprey, Hobby, that we may reasonably conjecture that had the birds been unmolested, we should have had them as breeding species in the neighbourhood at the present time. Some, I fear, have disappeared never to return, for instance, the Osprey, whilst others, owing to their conspicuous plumage, will never have a chance unless more pains are taken to educate the rising generation. Only this spring a Hoopoe was brought me for identification, the possessor saying he thought it had escaped from some aviary, so he shot it to save it from being lost.

Just prior to the last decade Starlings commenced breeding in the district.

From 1860 to 1870 we get recorded: Crossbills, Hoopoe, Kite, Osprey, Hobby, Smew, Pallas's Sand Grouse, Quail year (1870), Crane, Little Bustard, Dotterel, Phalarope years (1866 and 1870), White Knot (1875), Black-tailed Godwit, Black Tern (summer plumage), Richardson's Skua and Buffon's Skua (mature dress), Great Northern Diver and Black-throated Diver (summer dress).

These records are very interesting. The flocks of Cross-bills occurred at the Moult and also at Widdicombe. The Kite was shot near Loddiswell. A farmer proceeding to church one Sunday morning saw this bird feeding on the carcass of a sheep; instead of carrying his first intention into effect, he returned for his gun and shot the bird. On the night of May 11th, 1861, the keeper on duty at the Start Lighthouse was surprised at discovering a great number of birds flying around and against the lantern of that building, and dropping either dead or much exhausted. The wind at the time was blowing strong from the north-east, with rain; after some time it became much calmer, the birds continuing to rush against the lantern, increasing in numbers as the gale went down, and finally reaching the immense number of six hundred and ninety-two; and he had the curiosity to weigh them, and they amounted to about thirty-four pounds, consisting chiefly of Skylarks, House Sparrows, and several varieties of the smaller kinds of birds, amongst which was a Cuckoo. This may have been the back-wash of a late wave of migration swept out to sea, in which the Sparrows had been caught up, they not being a migratory species. These rushes of panic-stricken or exhausted birds are happily becoming much rarer, as the lights are rapidly being changed from the fixed light to one of a revolving or occulting character, the attraction of a flashing light not being so great, apparently, as that of a fixed one.

The summer of 1863 witnessed an irruption of Pallas's Sand Grouse over the whole of Europe; a flock occurred at Slapton Sands, and specimens were secured. The periodic flights of this Grouse from their home in Eastern Tartary and China present one of the most interesting problems connected with bird life, the real reasons which induce such being still in doubt. In 1888 a still greater number arrived, in flocks numbering thousands, but none occurred here.

The Crane frequented a large grass field near the Start for some days; it kept the middle of the field, and defied all efforts to shoot it. We get no record of the Little Bustard, Osprey, or Hobby after this decade.

From 1870 to 1880 we find recorded: Rufous Warbler, Blue-headed Wagtail, Rose-coloured Pastor, Hoopoe, Short-eared Owls (great flight in 1876), Little Bittern, Night Heron, Bewick's Swan, Green-winged Teal, White-eyed Duck, Smew, Little Tern, Curlew Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit, Bar-tailed Godwit, Pomatorhine Skua (great flight 1879), Richardson's Skua, Leach's Petrel.

In this decade we get a second example of the Rufous Warbler, shot near Slapton, its peculiar flight attracting notice; only three of these birds have ever been obtained in Great Britain. The Blue-headed Wagtail and Curlew Sandpiper were first detected as occurring in the neighbourhood. The Green-winged Teal I saw myself in the flesh; it is only the second example that has occurred in Great Britain. The White-eyed Duck was a female, and was picked out from amongst the slain after a Ley day in 1874. An immense flock of Bar-tailed Godwits came into the estuary in May, 1876; it is only rarely these birds visit us in the spring migration, when they are in full summer dress. The two Bewick's Swan were shot on the estuary.

From 1880 to 1890 are recorded: Nightingale, Great Grey Shrike, Tree Sparrow, Brambling (huge flocks winter of 1889-90), Lesser Redpole, Chough (last nesting pair shot probably 1885), Wryneck, Hoopoe, Kite, Merlins, Spoonbill, Grey Lag Goose, Bean Goose, White-fronted Goose, Bernacle Goose, Stock Doves (first noticed breeding 1887), Quail year (1885), Stone Curlew, Dotterel, Spotted Redshank, Black Tern (summer, 1890), Pomatorhine Skua (great flight 1885).

These records are rather voluminous, but are very interesting, though only few can be touched on; the Tree Sparrow, Lesser Redpole, and Stock Dove are added as indigenous to the district. The Great Grey Shrike was shot in a thorn bush on Ore Point; his larder, which I found well stocked in the thorns, consisted of small birds and beetles. The pair of Choughs were shot on Folly Cliffs during the breeding season in 1885, and were probably the last left on this part of the coast. The Grey Lag Goose fraternized with a flock of tame ones for some days before it was shot with a rifle at six hundred yards. The Nightingales came in a small flock (a most unusual circumstance) of about twenty, and were noticed in a hedge leading down to the sea at Thurlestone; they were accompanied by Redstarts, and neither species was identified until brought into the town.

In the last seven years—from 1890 to 1897—we get records of: White Wagtail (first identified with district), Woodchat Shrike, Hoopoe, Short-eared Owl (great flights 1893), Bitterns, Pink-footed Goose, Bernacle Goose, Surf Scoter, Smew, Quail year (1892), Phalarope year (1891), Ruff, Spotted Redshank, Bar-tailed Godwit, years (1895 and 1891), Little Gull, Sabine's Gull, Manx Shearwater.

The White Wagtail, which is the Continental form of our Pied Wagtail, may be often seen at the times of migration. This spring I obtained a male that had undoubtedly been nesting in the neighbourhood, but I could not locate the nest.

The Woodchat Shrike I shot close to Bantham village, and is new to the district. There was a great flight of Short-eared Owls in the fall of 1893. In one turnip field a party of sportsmen flushed more than twenty, and some were unfortunately shot and thrown into the hedge. Twelve Bitterns were shot at Slapton Ley during the winter of 1890-91, but the owners of that splendid bit of water have taken steps to prevent such wanton destruction again. The Pink-footed Goose is the only specimen obtained in the county, and I secured it by a bit of good luck. Hearing late on a Saturday night a goose had been shot near Aveton Gifford, I rode out early the next morning to see it and secure it if possible. On calling at the house and enquiring, I was told "mother was plucking 'un for dinner." However, that process had fortunately not begun; and on the bird being brought out I instantly detected the species and secured the prize, being glad to substitute another dinner.

The Bar-tailed Godwits, after an interval of twenty years, were driven by adverse winds into the estuary two years in succession. The Surf Scoter was brought me late one night, and being very busy at the time I did not closely examine the bird, and told the boy to take it away. His reply—"Father told me to fling it into the tide if you didn't want it"—saved the bird, and on a closer examination next morning I discovered the *rara avis*. The Little Gull I shot on the estuary was the first obtained here; and so with the two specimens of Sabine's Gull, one of which I shot at Besands, the other at Bantham. Manx Shearwaters occurred in immense flocks off Bolt Tail in the fall of 1895; they settled around my boat like a flock of tame pigeons, eagerly devouring the mackerel brit, which was driven to the surface by the schools of preying fish below. Large flocks were again seen off Prawle Point the end of March this year.

This terminates our imperfect sketch, which must not be taken for a complete statement of records, as space only allows the most interesting to be touched upon.





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